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ABSTRACT

If live-model prosocial programs such as "Sesame Street" and "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" can facilitate favorable behavior in preschoolers, as was shown by Rushton (1982), then it seems reasonable to suggest that cartoons might have a similar positive impact. This study sought to determine whether viewing a prosocial cartoon would be as effective as viewing a live-model prosocial program in inducing prosocial behavior in preschool children. A total of 40 preschool-aged boys and girls were shown one of four 15-minute videotapes, including (1) a prosocial cartoon with the theme of making new friends; (2) a neutral cartoon about entering a motorcycle race; (3) a prosocial live-model focusing on friendship; and (4) a neutral live-model showing the feeding of whales and dolphin. Subjects were subsequently observed during 30 minutes of free play and their action was scored for frequency of prosocial behavior. As predicted, viewing a prosocial cartoon was as effective as a live-model prosocial program in eliciting positive behaviors. Children in both prosocial viewing conditions demonstrated more prosocial behavior than did those in both neutral viewing conditions. This finding suggests that increased prosocial cartoon programming would have a positive influence on preschool children's behavior. (Author/RH)

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Effect of Prosocial Cartoons on Preschool Children

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Running head: EFFECT OF PROSOCIAL CARTOONS

Abstract

While numerous studies have demonstrated that children model prosocial behavior from human models, studies supporting modeled prosocial behavior from animated models are virtually non-existant. Given the overwhelming amount of evidence that children model antisocial behavior from cartoons, it was hypothesized that the presentation of an animated visual model would be as effective as would a nonanimated visual model in eliciting prosocial behavior in preschool children. The 2 x 2 factorial design consisted of: mode of presentation (animated or nonanimated) x behavior depicted (neutral or prosocial), yielding four experimental conditions. Forty preschool-aged boys and girls were shown one of the four 15-minute videotapes, and were then observed during 30 minutes of free-play. As predicted, children in both prosocial viewing conditions demonstrated more prosocial behavior than did those in both neutral viewing conditions. This finding suggests that increased prosocial cartoon programming would have a positive influence on preschool childrens' behavior.

Effect of Prosocial Cartoons on Preschool Children

The relationship between viewing violent television programs and subsequent viewer aggression has been extensively researched and firmly established in the past twenty years. The 1972 Surgeon General's report on the effects of television on social behavior went as far as saying that there is "short term causation of aggressive behavior as a function of exposure to televised violence" (In Lefrancois, 1980, p. 297). In 1973, Murray reported that almost 99% of all households with preschool children owned television sets and that these children watched at least 2 to 3 hours of television every day - even more on weekends. It is not surprising that children model aggressive behavior viewed on television. Observational learning, or learning through imitation has long been assumed to account for a great deal of social learning. In addition to modeled aggressive behavior, studies have also demonstrated that television can modify children's behavior in a prosocial direction (Rushton, 1982).

Typically, the stimulus for both aggressive and prosocial modeling has been a real life (nonanimated) model. Although animated models have been shown to produce aggressive behavior, virtually no studies

have shown the impact of a prosocial animated (cartoon) model. Such is not surprising given the fact that only 2% of all children's cartoons are free of aggressive content (Gerbner, 1972). Children, beginning at age 1½ to 2 years. prefer cartoons to all other formats of television programming (Murray, 1973). While it has been suggested that cartoons may have less impact on children than live-action programs because they are so obviously unrealistic, it is important to note that preschool children have a difficult time making the distinction between fiction and reality. It is therefore not surprising to find such a strong link between the viewing of aggressive cartoons and modeled aggressive behavior (for a review see: Stein and Friedrich, 1975). If live-model prosocial programs such as "Sesame Street" and "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" could facilitate favorable behavior in preschoolers, as was shown by Rushton (1982), then it seems reasonable to suggest that cartoons might have a similar positive impact.

The present study was designed to demonstrate that the viewing of a prosocial cartoon would be equally as effective as would the viewing of a live-model prosocial program in inducing prosocial behavior in preschool children.

Method

Subjects

The 40 children (21 boys and 19 girls) used in this study were all between 3 and 5 years of age (M = 4.3 years) from four classrooms at a private preschool. All subjects were from Caucasian, middle-income families, and were treated in accordance with the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists (American Psychological Association, 1981).

Procedure

The 2 x 2 factorial design yielded four experimental conditions with each class serving as a group and each group randomly assigned to one condition. The four 15-minute videotapes included:

1. Prosocial cartoon - "The Get-Along Gang"
   theme: making new friends
2. Neutral cartoon - "Alvin and the Chipmunks"
   theme: entering a motorcycle race
3. Prosocial live-model - "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood"
   theme: friendship
4. Neutral live-model - "Animal Express"
   theme: feeding whales and dolphin.

Each class viewed their program in the school's youth lounge. Afterwards, the children returned to their classroom and were immediately observed during

30 minutes of unstructured free-play. The researchers served as observers and were unaware of which program the class had seen. Each child was scored for frequency of prosocial behaviors. The term "prosocial" included such generally accepted behaviors as social contacts, helping, cooperation, following directions, sharing, self-control, and delay of gratification.

Results

The mean prosocial behavior scores for each experimental condition are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Children in the prosocial viewing conditions scored higher than those in the neutral conditions. F (1, 36) = 7.31, $p < .05$. There were no differences between the live-model and cartoon modes of presentation, nor was the interaction significant.

Discussion

As predicted, the viewing of a prosocial cartoon was equally as effective as was a live-model prosocial program in eliciting positive behaviors. The two prosocial programs resulted in a greater frequency of prosocial behaviors than either of the two neutral

viewing conditions.

Young children prefer cartoons to all other program formats on television, and 98% of these cartoons are aggressive in content. As all preschool teachers know, children acting out violence from their cartoon viewing is a constant problem in the classroom. Children will watch - and model - whatever cartoons are made available to them. Producers of children's programming should be made aware of the potential of prosocial cartoons in facilitating favorable behavior in preschoolers. A greater effort should then be made to create fewer aggressive cartoons and more prosocial ones. Parents should be informed of the implications of these findings, and the potential positive impact that prosocial cartoons could have on their children's social behavior.

Although the results of this study are statistically reliable, some of the restrictions presented by a naturalistic field study may have diminished the actual effects. These restrictions include: length of time available for osberving the children during free-play, and the limited number of viewing periods. A clearly observable effect was found despite such field study restraints.

Television is a highly influential factor in the cognitive and behavioral development of young children.

"All television is educational, the only question is: What is it teaching?" (Liebert and Schwartzberg, 1977, p. 170).

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Table 1

Mean Prosocial Behavior Scores for Each Experimental Condition

	Cartoon	Live-Model	Mean
Prosocial	3.4	3.4	3.4
Neutral	2.6	2.3	2.4
Mean	3.0	2.8	

Note. Higher scores = greater frequency of prosocial behaviors.